

Conference to help define what should be preserved

By Daniel Barbarisi

Journal Staff Writer

PROVIDENCE — What makes a neighborhood historic? Could the post-World War II triple-deckers and ranches that dot Providence's Elmhurst and Mount Pleasant neighborhoods soon be considered examples of historic homes? What about suburban developments like Cranston's Garden City neighborhood?

The state's Historic Preservation and Heritage Commission will be asking those questions at its 23rd annual conference, on Saturday, April 12, an event that will use many of Providence's neighborhoods as templates to assess historic preservation efforts statewide.

Traditional definitions of "historic" often include buildings pre-WWII, or those that hearken back to older styles, but with 60 years now passed since the explosion of the American suburb, it may be time to redefine what a historic neighborhood is.

"I don't know what the answer is, but I know that sooner or later we need to at least think it through and identify how to make a decision," said Commission Executive Director Edward F. Sanderson.

"We don't know what's historic from the 1940s, '50s, and '60s, but we know that those buildings are old enough that we need to notice that they at least exist," Sanderson said.

The conference's keynote speaker, Prof. Richard W. Longstreth, of George Washington University, is expected to tackle that subject in his address. Longstreth has been extensively involved in efforts to save mid-20th-century architecture, including shopping centers, department store branches and warehouses, apartment complexes and a bus depot.

The conference will also focus on the history and future of preservation in Providence and Rhode Island at large. In recent history, preservationists have seen some great successes, and some significant failures.

One bus tour will visit "Providence's Greatest Hits — and Misses" in preservation. Another session, titled "The Thrill of Victory and the Agony of the Parking Lot" will address the loss of significant structures statewide, where many have been replaced with surface parking.

The conference will feature the neighborhoods of the West Side. These neighborhoods have been rising in stature of late after long being eclipsed by the city's East Side in garnering the attention of preservationists. Sessions will explore the areas around the Cranston Street Armory, Trinity Square and Parkis Avenue, among others.

The conference also marks the 40th anniversary for the commission, and will be a chance for attendees to take stock of past preservation efforts in Rhode Island, and to look at the future of preservation: the newest initiatives, the regulatory needs, and the coming threats.

“If Historic Preservation had not existed in Rhode Island, where would we be today?” Sanderson said. “If none of those buildings had been fixed up? I think we’d be in a sorry state.”

Sessions will begin at 9 a.m. at the Trinity United Methodist Church on Broad Street. Sessions and tours will follow on the city’s West Side, with lunch at the Cranston Street Armory.

Commission spokeswoman Sarah Zurier said Providence Mayor David N. Cicilline and Lt. Gov. Elizabeth Roberts are expected to speak at the opening session, and U.S. Rep. James R. Langevin is expected to speak at lunch. Sessions run until 5 p.m., followed by a closing reception at the Pearl Street Lofts.

Preregistration for the conference is \$40, including lunch, and must be mailed by Friday. Attendees can also sign up on the day of the conference.